

Safe Labour Suburbia? The changing politics of the Merseyside suburbs

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Abstract

Over the past 25 years, safe Conservative seats in the affluent Merseyside suburbs have instead become safe Labour seats. This remarkable political transition poses an important puzzle for students of voting behaviour. Analysis of voting patterns since 1979 underlines the exceptional scale of the shift to Labour on Merseyside compared to other metropolitan areas. Yet, substantial swings to Labour in suburban constituencies like Sefton Central and Wirral South in 2015 and 2017 cannot be explained with reference to wider evidence of the party's increased support among younger, more diverse, cosmopolitan populations. It is shown that Labour dominance on Merseyside has occurred via three distinct phases, with the political map of the city-region turning red, over time, from the core outwards. Explanations rooted in the changing relationship between the city and its suburbs are argued to best explain the emergence of Merseyside as a 'red conurbation'.

Keywords

Suburbs, city-regions, voting behaviour, Labour Party, Merseyside, Liverpool.

The Merseyrail network forms the UK's most extensive suburban rail network outside of London. Comprising two principal lines, the network connects central Liverpool to its suburban hinterland and, beyond, to a number of free-standing towns. The Northern Line extends, northwards, from Hunts Cross, an affluent suburban neighbourhood on the south-eastern fringe of Liverpool, through the city centre and then splits into three branches. The first branch runs to the seaside resort of Southport, via the former dock communities of Bootle and the affluent suburban communities of Crosby and Formby. The second extends to the historic Lancashire market-town of Ormskirk, via Aintree and Maghull, and the third, via Fazakerley, to the post-war new town of Kirkby. The Wirral Line's four branches connect a loop of four city centre underground stations, via the Mersey's former shipbuilding town of Birkenhead, to affluent suburban communities in Hoylake, Wallasey and Port Sunlight, with trains terminating in New Brighton, West Kirkby, Chester and Ellesmere Port. A more expansive definition of the network, that covered by Merseyrail's 'all-zone' pass, includes the City Line, which connects Liverpool Lime Street eastwards to the metropolitan boroughs of Knowsley and St Helens. Defined this way, 'Merseyrailside' comprises 92 stations, extending 36 miles from Southport in the north to Chester in the south and 27 miles from West Kirby in the west to Widnes in the east. Eighteen of the 19 parliamentary constituencies that can be reached on this extensive network were won by Labour at the 2017 General Election. All eight of the local authority districts it connects are currently Labour controlled.

To some extent, Labour dominance in Greater Merseyside reflects more general, long-term patterns of the concentrations of Labour Party support in English metropolitan areas. However, as this article sets out, the growth of the Labour vote on Merseyside since the late 1970s easily surpasses that found in any other conurbation. Indeed, the extent of contemporary Labour dominance on

Merseyside is both historically and geographically exceptional. In the eight constituencies making up the core of the conurbation, Labour vote shares in 2017 averaged 81 per cent. The four constituencies with the highest Labour vote shares in the country (Liverpool Walton; Knowsley; Liverpool Riverside; Bootle) were all located within this central zone of the Liverpool City-Region and recorded Labour vote shares of 84-86 per cent. Yet, the more remarkable development at recent elections has been the growth of the Labour vote in outer Merseyside. In the seven constituencies beyond the metropolitan core, Labour averaged 58.6 per cent of the vote in 2017, significantly more than its 41 per cent share in Great Britain as a whole. Proximity to Liverpool aside, there is no obvious explanation for the strength of Labour support in these affluent suburban areas. Whether viewed through the lens of 2011 Census data or through the window of a Merseyrail train, constituencies like Sefton Central and Wirral South simply do not look at all like safe Labour seats. As of June 2017, both are just that.

This paper seeks to identify what prompted the Merseyside suburbs to turn, and stay, red when their equivalents elsewhere did not. While it dismisses explanations rooted in notions of Merseyside as a 'red conurbation', the article does argue that the exceptional shift to Labour in the city-region can only be explained with reference to locally-specific factors. These drivers, which have been as much economic and cultural as they have political, also owe a great deal to the role of regeneration policies in bringing about a remarkable reintegration of Liverpool and its suburbs in recent decades.

Red Merseyside and other myths

Sefton Central has a strong claim to be the most unlikely safe Labour seat in Great Britain. Located to the north of Liverpool and primarily comprising the towns of Crosby, Formby and Maghull, it is affluent, settled and suburban in character. Among Great Britain's 633 parliamentary constituencies, it ranks second for home ownership (85.5%), 19th for the proportion of the population aged 65 and above (24.1%) and 65th for the proportion of the working-age population employed in higher grade occupations. In almost any other part of the country, this sort of socio-demographic profile would be indicative of a safe Conservative seat. Indeed, of the 25 constituencies in England with the most similar socio-demographic profiles to Sefton Central, 23 were won by the Conservatives in 2017. Yet, Sefton Central has been held by Labour since its creation in 2010 and with a steadily rising vote share. At the 2017 General Election, the Labour incumbent, Bill Esterson, increased his share of the vote to 63 per cent, a majority of 30 points over the second-placed Conservative candidate. Tellingly, Labour's only other two victories in constituencies with similarly high proportions of home-owners, pensioners and managerial-professional workers were in Wirral South and Wirral West, both located just to the south of Liverpool, on the other side of the Mersey. In these seats too, Labour's share of the vote rose in 2017, enabling Alison McGovern to secure an 18 point majority in Wirral South and Margaret Greenwood a 12 point majority in Wirral West. In both cases, these majorities exceeded those achieved by Labour candidates in these seats at the time of Tony Blair's 1997 landslide.

Table 1 summarises the unusual nature of Sefton Central, Wirral South and Wirral West among Labour-held seats. Among the 262 constituencies won by Labour in 2017, they rank first, second and third, respectively, for levels of home-ownership, with levels of owner occupation significantly above the average for Labour seats. Similarly, compared to other Labour seats, these suburban areas have unusual age profiles, ranking first, second and fourth among constituencies represented by the

party's MPs for the proportion of residents aged 65 plus. Levels of car ownership are higher than is typical for Labour seats, as is the proportion of working-age residents employed in higher-grade occupations. Meanwhile, White British residents make up 95-96 per cent of the population in all three constituencies, compared to an average of 74 per cent for all constituencies won by Labour in 2017. In short, Labour's new suburban heartlands in Merseyside are not typified by the concentrations of younger, diverse, cosmopolitan populations which are widely held to explain the party's dramatic surge in support elsewhere in the country.

Table 1: Key Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Merseyside's affluent suburban constituencies (2011 Census data)

	% Owner occupied housing	Rank among Lab-held seats	% population aged 65+	Rank among Lab-held seats	% employ in high grade roles*	Rank among Lab-held seats**	% Households with cars	Rank among Labour held seats	% population who are White British	Rank among Labour held seats
Sefton Central	85.5	1	24.1	1	54.1	12	83.2	4	96.4	33
Wirral South	79.9	2	22.2	4	51.4	22	81.3	12	96.0	41
Wirral West	78.6	3	23.0	2	53.0	16	80.4	16	95.4	53
Mean in Lab seats (n=262)	60.7	---	15.7	---	39.5	---	74.8	n/a	74.4	---

Census data aside, Labour's dominance on Merseyside might seem unsurprising. A popular narrative has emerged in recent decades that casts Liverpool and its metropolitan hinterland as a uniquely left-wing city, with a long reputation for socialist radicalism. Depictions of a proud history of Scouse Socialism are commonplace. Marren refers to a "local tradition of trade union militancy, political radicalism and (...) an innate localised 'culture of opposition' characteristic to Liverpool".¹ An 'insider' account of the rise of the Militant Tendency in Liverpool declares that "The banner of the labour movement which was held by Glasgow – 'Red Clydeside' – in the aftermath of the First World War and during the 1920s has now passed, for the time being, to Liverpool".² At the 2016 Labour conference, party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, declared that "Liverpool has always been central to the Labour Party and to our movement". Yet, this narrative of 'Red Merseyside' is essentially a myth. While there is more than enough in Liverpool's political history to cherry-pick moments of notable left radicalism, Labour's dominance in the city is a relatively recent phenomenon. The shift towards Labour in its suburbs is more recent still.

Labourism came late to Liverpool. Among the 22 largest urban areas in Britain, only Liverpool and Portsmouth returned more Conservative than Labour MPs at the four general elections held in the

1950s. In 1955, six of Liverpool's nine parliamentary constituencies were won by Conservative candidates and it was not until 1964 that Labour reduced Conservative representation in the city to two MPs. Liverpool Garston, a mostly suburban constituency in the south-end of the city, was held continually by the Conservatives from 1950 to 1983, albeit with a brief Labour interlude from 1974-79. A similar pattern was evident in local politics. It took until 1956 for Labour to secure a majority on Liverpool City Council, making it the last major British city to be governed by the party. Labour then controlled the city for only 23 of the following 50 years, with the Conservatives continuing to poll well enough to govern Liverpool from 1967-71. The eight years of Labour control from 1983-91, during which the Militant Tendency briefly held sway within the ruling Labour group, are, without doubt, responsible for much of the city's reputation as a bastion of the left. It is rather less commonly noted that the Liberal Democrats were in majority control of Liverpool City Council from 1998-2007, at a time when the Labour Party were ascendant in British politics nationally.

If Liverpool's post-war politics was more complicated than commonly supposed, matters always seemed more straightforward beyond the core city. The planned decentralisation of industrial jobs and housing created a solid Labour heartland to Liverpool's immediate east, in what became the Metropolitan Borough of Knowsley following the 1974 reorganisation of local government. Beyond Knowsley, the mining town of St Helens, formally part of Merseyside since 1974, also remained solidly Labour. By contrast, two distinct sets of affluent suburban communities, one spread across the Wirral, to the south of Liverpool, the other along the Sefton coast, to its north, were safe Conservative territory. Aside from Birkenhead, parliamentary constituencies on the Wirral consistently returned Conservative MPs from 1950-87. While the Conservatives lost the ultra-marginal seat of Wallasey to Labour in 1992, the party comfortably held Wirral West and Wirral South with majorities of 22 and 15 percentage points respectively. Crosby (from which Sefton Central was largely created in 2010) had been just as solidly Conservative. While Shirley Williams caused an upset by winning Crosby for the SDP in the famous November 1981 by-election, Malcolm Thornton promptly reclaimed the seat for the Conservatives at the 1983 general election, doubling his majority in 1987 and again in 1992. Like his counterpart in Wirral West, Thornton headed into the 1997 general election with the cushion of a 22 point majority. These notable concentrations of Conservative support were also such that two of Merseyside's five metropolitan boroughs, Sefton and Wirral, were controlled by the Conservatives from 1975-85, as was Merseyside County Council from 1977-81. Thereafter, the Conservatives remained a significant force in local government in Sefton and the Wirral. It is only since 2012 that Labour has controlled all 5 Merseyside local authorities simultaneously.

The making of a metropolitan exception

If Labour's recent performance in outer-Merseyside is not a product of a long local tradition of left-wing politics, is it perhaps a reflection of wider metropolitan trends? Merseyside is, after all, far from alone in witnessing a decline in Conservative Party fortunes and a related rise in support for Labour. The growth of Labour support in big cities and its decline in small towns and rural areas was evident by the early 1980s.³ Following the 2015 and 2017 elections, this trend has become even more pronounced, reflecting what Jennings and Stoker see as a growing bifurcation between growing 'cosmopolitan' and declining 'backwater' constituencies.⁴ However, at a metropolitan scale, these

patterns are less consistent than they are for core cities. Table 2 shows the vote shares obtained by the Conservatives and Labour in Greater London and the six metropolitan counties in 1979 and 2017, and the net swing for each metropolitan area over this 38 year period. (The vote shares for 1979 are based on estimates of the 1979 results using the 1983 boundaries, since it was only from 1983 that parliamentary constituencies were aligned with the 1974 reorganisation of local government that created the metropolitan counties).

As table 2 highlights, from 1979-2017, overall support for Labour increased in all metropolitan areas, with the exception of South Yorkshire. Metropolitan areas have therefore seen swings from Conservative to Labour generally well above those for Britain as a whole. However, there are also very significant differences between conurbations. In West Yorkshire, Tyne and Wear and the West Midlands, the 1979-2017 swing to Labour ranged from 4.0 to 6.6 points. The move towards Labour is notably stronger in Greater Manchester and Greater London, with long-term net swings in Labour's favour of 9.2 and 13.9 points respectively. However, on Merseyside, there has been a remarkable 22.8 point swing to Labour over this period. In 1979, the Conservatives had performed relatively well in Merseyside, with a county vote share just 4.2 points behind Labour. After Greater London and the West Midlands, Merseyside represented the third highest Conservative vote share in an English metropolitan area. By 2017, however, the Conservatives trailed Labour by a remarkable 49.8 points in Merseyside, which now ranked very clearly as Labour's best, and the Conservative's worst, performance across all 53 counties in England and Wales. The rise of Labour on Merseyside is clearly exceptional.

Table 2: Labour and Conservative vote shares in Greater London and the metropolitan counties, 2017 and 1979.

	2017		1979 (1983 boundaries)		1979- 2001 2017
	Con (%)	Lab (%)	Con (%)	Lab (%)	Net Swing
Merseyside	21.4	71.2	40.8	45	-22.8
Tyne and Wear	28.5	60.8	33.9	54.7	-5.7
South Yorkshire	29.8	56.9	30.9	57.1	-0.5
Greater Manchester	32.5	56.9	40.1	46	-9.2
Greater London	33.1	54.5	46	39.6	-13.9
West Yorkshire	37.8	53.3	38.4	46	-4.0
West Midlands	39.9	52.4	45.5	44.8	-6.6
GB	43.4	41.0	44.9	37.8	-2.4

A simple comparison of two data points, 1979 and 2017, risks hiding significant fluctuations at the intervening general elections. Figure 1 therefore charts party shares of the vote on Merseyside at the 10 general elections from 1979-2017. As the graph illustrates, the rise in Labour's vote share across Merseyside occurred in two key phases, the first from 1983 to 1997 and the second from 2010 to 2017. In both phases, the Alliance/Liberal Democrats played a crucial role in shifting the balance between Labour and the Conservatives, ultimately to the benefit of Labour. At the 1983 General Election, the Alliance had taken support from both Labour and the Conservatives. However, in 1987, the Alliance's vote share plateaued, while the Conservatives' share of the vote continued to decline, to the direct benefit of Labour. In 1992 and 1997, support for Labour increased further in Merseyside, in line with the party's growth in support nationally. In 1997, 62 per cent of votes cast in Merseyside were for Labour, an increase of 22 points since 1983. At the 2001, 2005 and 2010 General Elections, Labour's share of the vote then dropped, but never below the level achieved in 1992. Critically, this fall in Labour support left the Conservative vote share virtually unchanged at around 20 per cent, and it was the Liberal Democrats who proved to be the primary beneficiaries. Consequently, when the Liberal Democrat vote collapsed in 2015, it was Labour who gained, returning their support to the level recorded in 1997. The Conservatives recorded their lowest ever Merseyside vote share, despite winning a narrow majority in the Commons. In 2017, Labour increased its Merseyside share to 71 per cent, as the Liberal Democrat vote was squeezed further, and support for UKIP and the Greens collapsed.

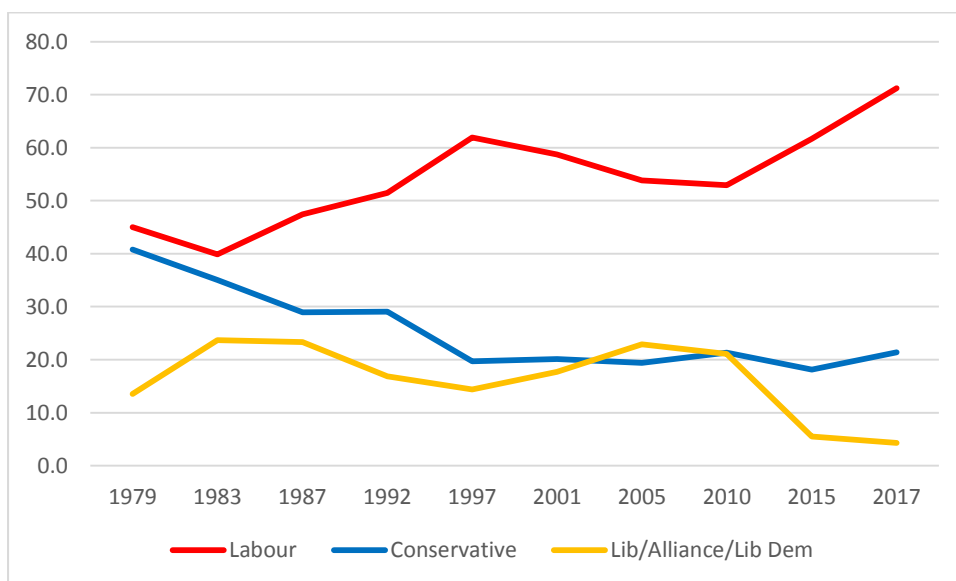


Figure 1: Party Shares of the Vote, Merseyside, 1979-2017

The trends shown in Figure 1 inevitably reflect a mix of local and national shifts in support for the political parties. To strip out national influences, Figure 2 shows each party's general election vote share on Merseyside from 1979 to 2017 as a ratio of its national vote share. This graph shows that, in 1979, Labour was already performing better on Merseyside than it was nationally. However, it is equally notable that both Conservative and Liberal vote shares in the conurbation at that time were close to their levels of support nationally. This picture was to change dramatically over the next nine general elections. The rise in Labour support locally in 1983 and 1987 was very much against the national trend, as was the related drop in Conservative support during this period. Thereafter, Labour continued to poll in Merseyside at about 1.4 times its national rate until 2010, when support

for Labour held up locally despite a sharp drop in the Labour vote nationally. In 2015, Labour's 62 per cent of the vote on Merseyside was double its national share. The other side of the story is arguably even more striking, however. From 1997 to 2017, the Conservatives increased their share of the vote in Great Britain from 32 to 43 per cent. Yet this rise in the Conservative vote nationally barely registered on Merseyside at all. In both 2015 and 2017, Conservative support was at half the level in the country as a whole.

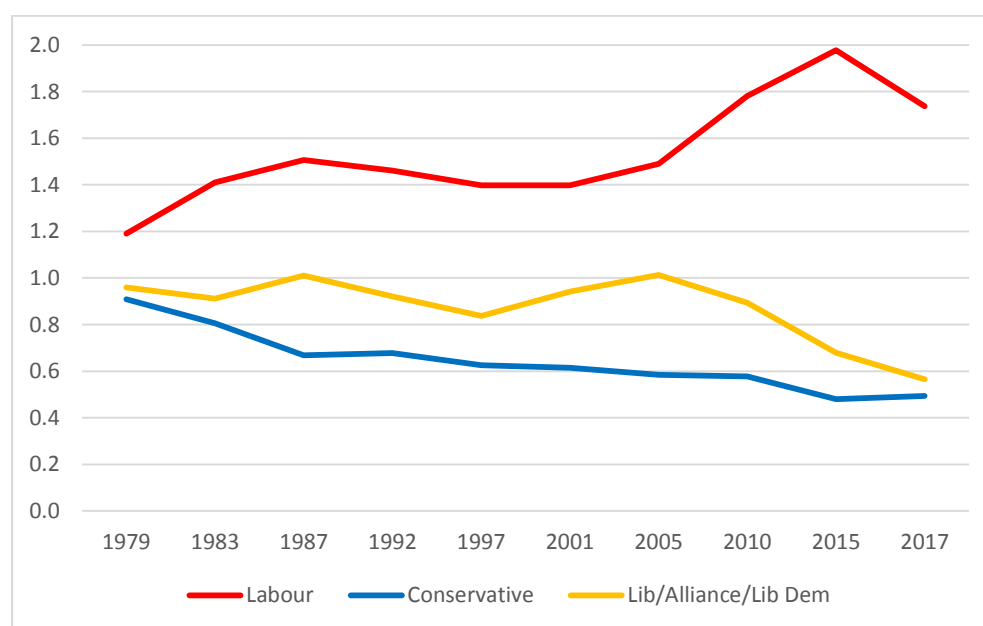


Figure 2: Party shares of the vote in Merseyside as ratio of each party's GB vote shares, 1979-2017

Turning red from the inside out

The phases identified above were accompanied by distinct geographical shifts in the balance of Labour and Conservatives support on Merseyside. In 1983 and 1987, Labour's improved performance was concentrated in constituencies at the core of the conurbation. Table 3 ranks the swing over 2 elections from 1979-87 in each Merseyside constituency. In contrast to a 2.4 point swing nationally to the Conservatives over this period, every Merseyside seat saw a swing to Labour. However, the variations in swing were enormous, revealing clear differences between an economically decaying metropolitan core and the still affluent metropolitan suburbs. The biggest swings to Labour were all in Liverpool or Knowsley, districts hit exceptionally hard by job loss during the 1980s. In four of Liverpool's six constituencies, swings of ten points or more to Labour were recorded, with the swing to Labour in the two Knowsley constituencies falling just short of double digits. By contrast, in suburban areas long dominated by the Conservatives, and far less affected by deindustrialisation, the swings to Labour were far more modest. Wirral West, Wirral South and Crosby all remained safe Conservative seats in 1987, while Wallasey was also retained by the Conservatives in the face of a Labour challenge. In Southport, the headline swing was to the Alliance, enabling the Liberal candidate to take the seat in 1987. Yet, support for the Conservatives remained strong here also and the party regained the seat in 1992.

Table 3: Swing from Conservative to Labour in Merseyside constituencies, 1979-87

Constituency	Swing to Labour
Liverpool Mossley Hill	19.6
Liverpool Broadgreen	17.2
Liverpool Walton	14.4
Liverpool West Derby	10.2
Knowsley North	9.6
Knowsley South	9.5
Liverpool Garston	9.3
Bootle	8.5
Birkenhead	8.3
Liverpool Riverside	6.5
St Helens North	4.9
Wallasey	4.8
Wirral West	4.2
Wirral South	2.8
St Helens South	2.2
Crosby	1.4
Southport	0.7

The sharp increase in Labour support on Merseyside between 1992 and 1997 arose from a very different dynamic to that seen from 1979-87. Set against a 10.2 point national swing to Labour in 1997, constituency swings on Merseyside were again highly diverse. However, the geographical pattern observed from 1979-87 was essentially inverted. The four highest swings, of 14 points or more, were all in more affluent suburban areas and were of such magnitude that they handed three previously safe Conservative seats to Labour (Crosby, Wirral South, Wirral West) and transformed a Labour-Conservative marginal to a safe Labour seat (Wallasey). The 18.1 point swing to Labour in Crosby was the third highest recorded in 1997 and counted among the most surprising results of New Labour's landslide. Indeed, despite being the first seat of the night to change hands from the Conservatives to Labour, there were no television cameras present to witness it; nobody had seriously expected the Conservatives to forfeit Crosby.

Table 4: Swing from Conservative to Labour in Merseyside constituencies, 1992-1997

Constituency	Swing to Labour
Crosby	18.1
Wallasey	16.9
Wirral South	15.4
Wirral West	13.8
Knowsley North & Sefton East	12.5
Liverpool, Wavertree	12.4
Liverpool, Garston	9.8
St Helens North	9.1

St Helens South	8.6
Birkenhead	8.5
Knowsley South	7.8
Southport	6.5
Liverpool, West Derby	6.2
Liverpool, Walton	6.1
Bootle	6.0
Liverpool, Riverside	1.7

In the context of the Blair landslide, these Labour victories in previously safe Conservative seats on Merseyside were remarkable, but not exceptional. What was exceptional was that Labour subsequently retained them. In 1997, Labour gained 19 traditionally Conservative seats with rates of owner occupation above 70 per cent on swings of 12 points or more. However, all but four of these constituencies (or their redrawn successor seats) had returned safely to the Conservative fold by 2015.⁵ In addition to Gedling in Nottinghamshire, the exceptions were all on Merseyside: Wirral South, Wirral West, and Sefton Central (the successor seat to Crosby). Moreover, Labour has done more than simply retain its seats in suburban Merseyside. As table 5 illustrates, electoral support has swung significantly towards Labour in these areas since 2010, establishing Sefton Central and Wirral South as safe Labour seats and consolidating Labour's majority in Wirral West. Equally notable is the 14 point swing to Labour in Wallasey; a safe Conservative seat until 1987, it now has a 48 point Labour majority.

Table 5: Swing from Conservative to Labour in Merseyside constituencies, 2010-17

Constituency	Swing to Labour
Wallasey	13.9
Liverpool, Riverside	13.3
Sefton Central	11.0
Liverpool, Wavertree	10.9
Southport	10.2
Wirral West	9.2
Liverpool, West Derby	9.0
Wirral South	8.5
Garston and Halewood	8.3
Birkenhead	7.4
Bootle	7.2
Knowsley	7.1
Liverpool, Walton	5.9
St Helens South and Whiston	5.5
St Helens North	3.6

How the suburbs were won

The patterns of electoral change outlined above offer important clues as to where explanations for the emergence of Merseyside's red suburbs should focus. As well as accounting for the particularly

pronounced shifts to Labour in Merseyside's suburbs in 1997, the more puzzling consolidation of Labour's position in these areas over the subsequent 20 years requires explanation. Moreover, given the observed spatial patterns of political change on Merseyside, there is a need to identify how Labour's earlier consolidation in core inner-urban constituencies was transmitted, centrifugally, to the outer-suburbs. Four potential factors are set out below. In each case, the proximity of these suburban constituencies to Liverpool is of direct importance.

The first factor is psephological and centres on the role of the Liberal Party and its successors in facilitating the long-term movement of support from the Conservatives to Labour. Prior to Blair's repositioning of Labour on the centre-left, many Merseyside suburbanites seeking to vote against the Conservatives had opted for the Liberals, the SDP or the Liberal Democrats. Liverpool had emerged as a key centre of the Liberal Party revival in the 1970s, with the party's dramatic surge in support in the 1973 council election precipitating the decline of the Conservatives in Liverpool.⁶ By the early 1980s, the Liberals were consistently ahead of the Conservatives in local elections and by the mid-1980s they had eclipsed the Conservatives as the main party of opposition in the city. Importantly, Liberal success in Liverpool had been built on the local party's development of community-based 'pavement politics'. The accumulated campaigning expertise and capacity greatly assisted the efforts of the Alliance to make in-roads in Merseyside. Other than the 1981 Crosby by-election, the only Alliance victory in outer Merseyside was in Southport in 1987. However, the rise in the third-party vote had the impact of reducing Conservative Party vote shares (but not majorities) and this proved crucial in 1997, when widespread tactical voting took place. Voters who had supported the Alliance in the 1980s had little difficulty switching to New Labour in 1997. The effect was most evident in Crosby, where previous support for the Alliance had been strongest, and the swing to Labour in 1997 was greatest. As Brian Cathcart puts it "Crosby had once, briefly, been an SDP seat for Shirley Williams, but now the well-heeled LibDems of Crosby were voting tactically in their thousands to get the Conservatives out".⁷

Such tactical voting is unlikely to have occurred but for the second factor: a shift in how Merseyside suburbanites perceived the city of Liverpool and its politics. To a remarkable degree, political identities in the affluent Merseyside suburbs were underpinned in the 1980s and early 1990s by a concern to disassociate from the economic decline of Liverpool, its related social problems and its descent into political chaos. As Shirley Williams recalls in her memoir, when she arrived in Crosby to fight the November 1981 by-election, she found that:

(...) respectable middle-class families lived behind looped lace curtains in Victorian houses – it was as if they were pulling their skirts above their ankles to escape the degradation of a Liverpool that was running down and beset by riots and crime. Liverpool was Labour, had been for decades. That was one reason that Crosby was so Conservative. Beyond Crosby, alongside the wide sandy beaches of the Mersey estuary, were Blundellsands and Formby, desirable places to live. They were occasionally reminded of their great city neighbour by the detritus and lumps of sewage washed up by the tide.⁸

By the mid-1990s, the decline of Liverpool had bottomed-out as the regeneration efforts of the previous 15 years began to bear fruit. The granting of European Objective 1 status for Merseyside in 1993 had commenced the process of injecting hundreds of millions of pounds of investment into the city-region. Meanwhile, the association between Liverpool and the radical left politics of Militant

was weakening rapidly, particularly given Labour's re-positioning nationally. By 1997, voters in Crosby or on the Wirral were much less inclined to associate a vote for Labour with the Trotskyist rhetoric of Derek Hatton or the desperate job-seeking of Yosser Hughes.⁹

In the decade or so following Labour's 1997 general election victory, the relationship between Liverpool and its suburbs underwent a dramatic transformation. New Labour policies aimed to establish cities as engines of improved regional economic performance. Underpinned by national economic growth and a second round of Objective 1 funding from 2000-06, local policy-makers responded to this agenda enthusiastically. The local conversion to urban entrepreneurialism was dramatically accelerated by the Liberal Democrats taking control of Liverpool City Council, somewhat ironically, in the immediate aftermath of Labour's 1997 landslide. The resurgence of Liverpool in the 2000s, epitomised by its year as European Capital of Culture in 2008, reversed the long-term 'hollowing-out' of Merseyside. The city's population and employment base began to grow for the first time in 100 years, drawing 'isolationist' outer-suburbs into a closer relationship with the newly-dynamic metropolitan core. The Merseyrail network, which had previously allowed archetypal Conservative voters to escape Liverpool, now facilitated a reconnection of the suburbs to the city. From 1997 to 2015, passenger usage of the two principal stations at the centre of the Merseyrail network increased fifteen-fold. That the reinvention of the city owed much, politically, to the Liberal Democrats, was neither here nor there. Liverpool's identity had undergone a transformation and its new-found cosmopolitanism was open to commuters too. Things had only got better, and it was not the Conservatives who could claim credit for it.

The structure of the city-region, including the connectivity afforded by its transport infrastructure, has also played a role with respect to the third factor: the cumulative imbalance of campaigning capacity between the Conservative and Labour. The decline of the Conservatives as an electoral force in Liverpool has been so absolute that they have not been represented on the city council since 1998. With no base in local government, the Liverpool Conservatives have shrunk to the point that they rarely campaign actively in more than a single ward. Conservative Associations on the Wirral and in Sefton have also had to contend with falling membership levels and an ageing activist base. By contrast, Labour's increased dominance in Liverpool and Merseyside politics has enabled it to sustain a large local membership and activist base. The enormous contrasts in the capacity of the local parties to engage with the electorate has become increasingly evident. The presence of ultra-safe Labour seats at the core of the city-region, where the largest concentration of its activists is based, has also facilitated the movement of activists out to the suburbs at election time. Labour's scope to deploy large numbers of campaigners in areas such as Wirral West has undoubtedly played a key role in countering the electoral advantages afforded to local Conservative candidates by the strategic channelling of donations to local Conservative Associations.¹⁰

The final factor was a uniquely local source of anti-Tory sentiment, the political impact of which is impossible to quantify, yet obvious to anyone who spends time in the city-region. In April 1989, the Hillsborough disaster resulted in the death of 96 Liverpool supporters attending the FA Cup semi-final. The disturbing chain of events which followed, involving collusion at the highest level between politicians, the police and the media to falsely lay the blame for the disaster with the Liverpool fans, cannot be adequately summarised here. In simple terms, the outcome was that the Conservatives, and particularly Margaret Thatcher, came to be held responsible locally for sanctioning the fabrication of police witness statements and for feeding falsehoods to sections of the Conservative-

supporting press. Almost 30 years on, the Sun newspaper, which ran the most notorious front-page story propagating lies about the behaviour of Liverpool supporters, faces a boycott so effective that it is virtually impossible to buy on Merseyside. Importantly, Hillsborough affected the suburbs as much as the city. Many of those who died, and many more who survived but thereafter lived with the trauma of attending the game, came from the outer boroughs. Hillsborough connected the city to the suburbs emotionally, via family and friendship networks, and though the fundamental significance of football to the cultural life of Merseyside. The siting of Hillsborough memorials outside Crosby library and at Port Sunlight on the Wirral are testament to how the impact of the disaster reached directly, and indefinitely, into the Conservative suburbs.

This paper has sought to explain the exceptional case of Merseyside's red suburbs. As a case study of outliers, in both a geographical and psephological sense, it is instructive in several ways. There is growing evidence that place matters to political preferences. Despite past scepticism, the possibility of neighbourhood effects on voting behaviour, centred on the proposition that 'people ~~to~~ who talk together, vote together', is being revisited.¹¹ To date, discussion has mostly centred on the polarisation between big cities and university towns, on one hand, and smaller towns locked into long-term decline, on the other. The dynamics of political change in the suburbs has received far less attention, partly because of the long-standing assumption that suburbanisation fosters conservative bias.¹² Yet, the Merseyside case suggests that suburbs do not automatically tack to the right politically and that specifically local factors, including shifts in the relationship between cities and suburbs, can radically alter the politics of the latter. The time may be ripe to pay more attention to what we can learn from the outliers.

¹ B. Marren, 'Working-class response to redundancies, closures and cuts on Merseyside in the age of Thatcherism', in A. Baldwin, C. Ellis and S. Etheridge (eds.) *Class, Culture and Community: New Perspectives in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century British Labour History*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishers, 2012, p.91.

² P. Taffe and T. Mulhearn, *Liverpool: The City That Dared to Fight*, London, Fortress, 1998.

³ J. Curtice and M. Steed, 'Electoral Choice and the Production of Government: The Changing Operation of the Electoral System in the United Kingdom since 1955', *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1982, pp. 249-298.

⁴ See W. Jennings and G. Stoker, 'The bifurcation of politics: Two Englands', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 87, no. 3, 2016, pp. 372-382; W. Jennings and G. Stoker, 'Tilting towards the cosmopolitan axis? Political change in England and the 2017 General Election', *The Political Quarterly*, vol 88, no 3, 2016, pp. 359-369; W. Jennings, W. Brett, A. Bua and R. Laurence, *Cities and Towns: The 2017 General Election and Social Divisions of Place*, London, New Economics Foundation.

⁵ The first of these seats to return to the Conservatives were Castle Point, Romford and Upminster, which also happened to be the only three Conservative gains from Labour in 2001. A further four of the 19 were regained by the Conservatives in 2005 (Bexleyheath and Crayford, Harwich, Hornchurch, Shipley). In 2010 and 2015, the Conservatives reclaimed and then held another eight of these 19 seats (several of which were also reconfigured by significant boundary changes).

⁶ D. Jeffery, 'The strange death of Tory Liverpool: Conservative electoral decline in Liverpool, 1945-1996', *British Politics*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp.386-407.

⁷ B. Cathcart, *Were You Still Up for Portillo?*, London, Penguin, p.44

⁸ S. Williams, *Climbing the Bookshelves*, London, Virago, 2009, p.292.

⁹ Derek Hatton was a leading figure in the Militant Tendency, a Trotskyist grouping within the Labour Party, and Deputy Leader of Liverpool City Council from 1983-86. Yosser Hughes was an iconic fictional character in Alan Bleasdale's television series, *Boys from the Blackstuff*, set in Liverpool and broadcast on the BBC in 1982, known for his frequently repeated catch-phrase 'gizza job'.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the role of targeted donations in Wirral West at the 2005 General Election, see S. Wilks-Heeg, *Purity of Elections in the UK: Causes for Concern*, York, Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust.

¹¹ Neighbourhood effects were first proposed by W.L. Miller, 'Social Class and Party Choice in England: A New Analysis', *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1978, pp. 257-284. For later discussion of the evidence, see: M. Harrop, A. Heath and S. Openshaw, 'Does neighbourhood influence voting behaviour - and why?', *British Elections and Parties Yearbook*, vol 1, no.1, 1991, pp.101-120 and R. Johnston, C. Pattie, D. Dorling, I. MacAllister, H. Tunstall and D. Rossiter, 'The neighbourhood effect and voting in England and Wales: Real or imagined?', *British Elections & Parties Review*, vol.10, no.1, pp. 47-63.

¹² See R. A. Walks, 'City-suburban electoral polarisation in Great Britain, 1950-2001', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 500-517.